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TAGS: PGOV PREL PREF PTER PHUM CO  
SUBJECT: Uribe conditions peace talks on verifiable end to  
FARC criminal acts

Classified By: Political Counselor John Creamer  
Reasons 1.4 (b and d)

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) President Uribe reiterated on March 31 that the FARC would have to verifiably cease all criminal activities if the group wanted to engage the GOC on peace talks. Uribe's comments followed the FARC's open letter to "Colombians for Peace," in which it voiced its willingness to discuss a humanitarian exchange and suggested it would no longer insist on a demilitarized zone as a pre-condition. Uribe also called on the international community to help the GOC fight terrorism as the quickest road to peace--citing Plan Colombia as an example of "effective support." Former Peace Commissioner Restrepo told us he doubts the FARC wants real talks, and said Uribe would have abolished the Peace Commissioner's office after his resignation if not for concern about possible international reaction. End Summary.

FARC MAY NOT INSIST ON DESPEJE

¶2. (U) On March 28, the FARC released its third open letter to the "Colombians for Peace" group led by Liberal Party Senator Piedad Cordoba. The FARC said it "was ready for a prisoner of war exchange," and indicated that the group would not make its previous demand for a demilitarized zone ("despeje") an "insurmountable obstacle" to a humanitarian accord. The FARC offered to provide proof of life to the families of 20 police and military held hostage by the group, and said it would hand over the remains of an Army major who reportedly died while in FARC custody--but only in exchange for the remains of FARC Secretariat members Raul Reyes and Ivan Rios. The group also confirmed that Pablo Catatumbo, Carlos Lozada, and Fabian Ramirez would be their spokesmen in any negotiation process.

¶3. (U) The FARC failed to respond directly to "Colombians for Peace's" previous request that it renounce kidnapping, but it did claim that it currently holds only nine "economic" hostages. Victim's rights group Pais Libre reported that its research shows 472 "economic" hostages in the FARC's hands, while families of the military held by the FARC asked why the group only mentioned 20 military hostages--as opposed to the 22 which has been reported by victims' groups. Restrepo said up to 3,500 FARC hostages remain unaccounted for over the years, and accused the FARC of genocide.

CORDOBA TO PUSH GOC ON FARC OFFER

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14. (C) Cordoba told the media on March 31 that she would "initiate negotiations" with the GOC aimed at starting talks on a humanitarian accord. She would attempt to meet with High Commissioner for Reintegration Frank Pearl--who assumed the duties of the Office of Peace Commissioner after the resignation of Luis Carlos Restrepo--on April 1 to discuss the proposal as well as the logistics for release of proof of life and exchange of remains. Cordoba said she is "optimistic," and highlighted the importance of the FARC change in position on the despeje. In contrast, Liberal Senator Cecilia Lopez said the FARC continued to send contradictory messages, asking for peace talks while continuing terrorist attacks. Local journalist Alfonso Cuellar told us Cordoba is largely following "a script that has been written by the FARC."

CATHOLIC CHURCH REITERATES SUPPORT FOR NEGOTIATED SETTLEMENT

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15. (U) Archbishop Ruben Salazar, head of the Colombian Catholic Bishops Conference, said in a March 29 interview with leading daily "El Tiempo" that "there is no military solution to the armed conflict." He said the Church-supported National Reconciliation Commission would propose a broad dialogue with civil society, unions, the media, and political leaders across the country to formulate a "minimum accord" that could serve as a basis for peace talks. Still, Salazar conceded that both the GOC and FARC remain "polarized" with "no chance" of compromise in the near-term. He also said that any talks on a humanitarian exchange should be linked to a broader peace process.

URIBE INSISTS ON END TO FARC CRIMINAL ACTS

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16. (U) President Uribe, speaking at an international counter-insurgency conference organized by the Defense Ministry and the USG on March 31, conditioned peace talks on "the cessation of all criminal acts by the groups which want to enter into such a process, with verification." Uribe said he would not allow Colombia to be "fooled again" by FARC peace overtures. Uribe said the GOC would redouble its diplomatic efforts to counter the FARC abroad, and said the most important contribution the international community could make to peace in Colombia would be to deny the FARC safe havens and help fight terrorism. He cited Plan Colombia as an example of "effective support."

PEACE COMMISSIONER LARGELY OUT OF BUSINESS

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17. (C) New U Party President and former-Peace Commissioner Luis Carlos Restrepo told us he doubts the FARC wants real peace talks, and said he will continue to serve as an ad hoc facilitator to the GOC on peace issues. He told us that despite Pearl's assumption of the Peace Commissioner Office's functions, Uribe had instructed Pearl to coordinate everything with him. Restrepo added that Uribe initially wanted to abolish the Peace Commissioner's office after his resignation, but later decided that such a move would send the wrong message internationally.

BROWNFIELD